

VZCZCXYZ0014
PP RUEHWEB

DE RUEHTUA #0086 0171618
ZNY CCCCC ZZH ZUI RUEWMC2552 0171620
P 171618Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY TUNIS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0000
INFO MAGHREB COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L TUNIS 000086

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA/FO - GRAY, CARPENTER, NEA/PI - ORBACH,
NEA/MAG - HOPKINS, HARRIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 01/16/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [KMPI](#) [PREL](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: DAS CARPENTER'S MEETING WITH ATCE DIRECTOR ROMDHANI

REF: STATE 3592

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

1. (C) SUMMARY: DURING HIS JANUARY 10-12 VISIT TO TUNIS, NEA DEPUTY ASSISTANT SECRETARY J. SCOTT CARPENTER MET WITH OUSSAMA ROMDHANI, DIRECTOR OF THE TUNISIAN EXTERNAL PRESS AGENCY (ATCE), ON JANUARY 11. DAS CARPENTER BRIEFED ROMDHANI ON THE PRESIDENT'S JANUARY 10 SPEECH ON IRAQ. ROMDHANI SAID THAT VIOLENCE IN IRAQ HAS A RIPPLE EFFECT ON THE REGION AND THAT PAN-ARAB MEDIA EXACERBATE THE SPREAD OF ANTI-WESTERN IDEOLOGIES. ROMDHANI NOTED THAT THE TUNISIAN MEDIA LACKS PROFESSIONALISM AND COULD BENEFIT FROM MEPI PROGRAMS. HE COMPLAINED THAT LOCAL HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS WERE FOCUSING ON THE WRONG ISSUES. WHILE DAS CARPENTER RAISED CONCERN ABOUT GOT HARASSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY, ROMDHANI PREDICTABLY CRITICIZED GOT OPPONENTS' "UNACCEPTABLE ATTITUDES." END SUMMARY.

2. (C) DAS CARPENTER BEGAN BY BRIEFING ROMDHANI ON PRESIDENT BUSH'S JANUARY 10 SPEECH ON IRAQ, NOTING WE CANNOT ABANDON IRAQ (REFTEL). ROMDHANI AGREED THAT DOING SO WOULD BE A "DISASTER," AND SAID SECTARIAN VIOLENCE IS LIKE A PANDORA'S BOX. WHAT IS HAPPENING IN IRAQ NOW, SAID ROMDHANI, HAS A RIPPLE EFFECT EVEN IN NORTH AFRICA. WHILE RADICALS AND TERRORISTS LIKE AL-QAEDA CLAIM TO BE SUNNI, ROMDHANI NOTED THEY ARE FROM "NO SIDE." THESE GROUPS ARE NOT INTERESTED IN DIALOGUE, SAID ROMDHANI. HE SAID THAT EXTREMISTS ARE BRAINWASHING CERTAIN ELEMENTS OF TUNISIAN YOUTH THROUGH MOSQUES AND THE INTERNET, AND ENFRANCHISEMENT DOES NOT MAKE PEOPLE IMMUNE TO EXTREMIST IDEALS. DAS CARPENTER NOTED THAT MORE POLITICAL SPACE WOULD ALLOW CENTRIST ARGUMENTS TO BE HEARD AND TO COMBAT EXTREMISM. ROMDHANI AGREED THAT SOME TUNISIANS ARE "ENTITLED TO CONTRIBUTE" TO SUCH DISCUSSIONS, BUT THAT EXTREMISTS AND FUNDAMENTALISTS ARE NOT.

3. (C) ROMDHANI WENT ON TO COMPLAIN ABOUT THE INFLUENCE OF PAN-ARAB SATELLITE NETWORKS ON THE TUNISIAN MEDIA, NOTING THE MIDDLE EAST HAS BECOME A REGIONAL MARKET OF MEDIA MESSAGES. ROMDHANI SAID THE MIDDLE EAST, MORE THAN NORTH AFRICA, NOW DICTATES THE AGENDA AND INFLUENCES PUBLIC OPINION IN TUNISIA. NORTH AFRICANS, HE EXPLAINED, ARE SHY AND TIMID AND THEREFORE SUFFER FROM AN IMAGE DEFICIT. FURTHER, THE COST OF ESTABLISHING A MODERATE COUNTERBALANCE TO THESE NETWORKS IS PROHIBITIVE, SAID ROMDHANI. "PEOPLE WITH MONEY ARE NOT ON THE RIGHT SIDE," ROMDHANI EXPLAINED, ALTHOUGH THE UNITED STATES "HAD DONE ITS PART" WITH AL-HURRA.

4. (C) DAS CARPENTER NOTED THAT THERE ARE MEPI PROGRAMS THAT COULD ADDRESS THE PROFESSIONALISM OF LOCAL MEDIA OUTLETS. ROMDHANI AGREED THAT PROFESSIONALISM IS THE MOST SERIOUS PROBLEM, BUT THAT NEWSPAPER OWNERS ARE TOO FOCUSED ON THEIR BOTTOM LINE TO HIRE QUALIFIED, EDUCATED JOURNALISTS. DAS CARPENTER ASKED ABOUT RECENT EDITORIALS AND GOT STATEMENTS DENOUNCING THOSE IN CONTACT WITH FOREIGN EMBASSIES AS

TRAITORS. ROMDHANI DODGED THE QUESTION, BLAMING PRIVATE NEWSPAPERS FOR BEING ANTI-WESTERN AND ANTI-SEMITIC. LOCAL COVERAGE IS INFLUENCED BY THE REGIONAL MEDIA AGENDA, ARGUED ROMDHANI, NOTING SOMETIMES ENTIRE STORIES TRANSCRIBED FROM REGIONAL MEDIA OUTLETS ARE PUBLISHED IN LOCAL PAPERS WITHOUT PERMISSION.

15. (C) TURNING TO RECENT SECURITY INCIDENTS IN TUNISIA, ROMDHANI SAID THE CELL INVOLVED "DID NOT REPRESENT MUCH ON THE POLITICAL AND IDEOLOGICAL LANDSCAPE" AND HAD NO LOGICAL MANIFEST. THE FACT THAT THE GROUP WAS REPORTEDLY TARGETING THE US AND UK EMBASSIES "UNDERLINES OUR COMMON FIGHT" AGAINST TERRORISM, SAID ROMDHANI. HE ADDED THAT IT IS NOW CLEAR TO THE TERRORISTS THAT TUNISIA IS A STATE THAT IS VIGILANT AND IS PRESENT IN ALL OF ITS TERRITORIES.

16. (C) ROMDHANI THEN TURNED TO CRITICIZE "CERTAIN HUMAN RIGHTS" ORGANIZATIONS THAT ARE "MISSING THE PRIORITY." WHILE NOTING THAT HE WAS NOT SURPRISED THAT "THESE GROUPS ARE DEFENDING THIS TERRORIST GROUP WITHOUT RECOGNIZING IT COULD BE DANGEROUS," CIVIL SOCIETY GROUPS HAVE A "PROPENSITY TO COMPLAIN" ABOUT THE GOT. DAS CARPENTER EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT INCREASED REPORTS OF GOT HARASSMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY ENTITIES. ROMDHANI SAID HE WOULD NOT AGREE, BUT ASSERTED THAT SOME PROBLEMS RESULT FROM INDIVIDUALS' "UNACCEPTABLE ATTITUDES." WE AGREE THAT THERE SHOULD BE SPACE FOR ALL NON-VIOLENT VIEWS, SAID ROMDHANI, AS LONG AS THOSE INVOLVED DO NOT BREAK THE LAW. ROMDHANI ADDED THAT HE IS CONFIDENT THAT PEOPLE CAN EXPRESS THEMSELVES FREELY IN TUNISIA.

17. (C) COMMENT: ROMDHANI, WHO IS LARGELY RESPONSIBLE FOR SHAPING TUNISIA'S PUBLIC IMAGE ABROAD, WAS PREDICTABLY FOCUSED ON GIVING A RATIONAL AND PRO-WESTERN SPIN ON LOCAL EVENTS, WHILE GLOSSING OVER THE GOT'S HEAVY-HANDED CONTROLS OVER SOCIETY. BLAMING EXTREMISM ON MOSQUES, WHICH ARE ALL GOT CONTROLLED AND STAFFED, AND THE "PRIVATE MEDIA," WHICH IS GOT INFLUENCED, ARE WEAK ATTEMPTS TO POINT THE FINGER ELSEWHERE. THIS SPIN IS EVEN LESS CREDIBLE GIVEN ROMDHANI'S ACCESS TO THE HIGHEST LEVELS OF THE GOT, INCLUDING SERVING AS THE PRESIDENT BEN ALI'S INTERPRETER. FRANK ENGAGEMENT OF ROMDHANI IS THUS A KEY ASPECT OF OUR FREEDOM AGENDA, AS DAS CARPENTER'S POINTS ARE LIKELY TO BE REACH KEY GOT DECISION-MAKERS. AMBASSADOR WILL FOLLOW UP WITH A PRIVATE MEETING WITH ROMDHANI ON JANUARY 17 AND THE MISSION AND MEPI OFFICE WILL SEEK TO BRING AN NYU PROGRAM ON ASSISTING MEDIA TO TUNIS, AS DISCUSSED DURING THE SESSION. END COMMENT.

18. (U) THIS CABLE HAS BEEN CLEARED BY DAS CARPENTER.
GODEC